"A Conclusionary Document"

Impact at Mineral King

In 1965, the U.S. Forest Service announced its intentions to open up for development the Mineral King Valley of the southern Sierra Nevada. In 1969, it accepted a proposal for an enormous year-round recreational village in the valley, a complex that would be among the largest of its kind in the nation. From the beginning, the Sierra Club has opposed this development, contending that the resort would compromise Sequoia National Park, which surrounds Mineral King, and would virtually destroy the Sequoia National Game Refuge, which comprises the valley and some of the adjacent back country.

The club's position reflects a concern for the status of Mineral King that goes back to the days of John Muir. In 1911, the club proposed that Sequoia National Park be enlarged to include, among other things, the Mineral King Valley as a logical and important part of the park. Congress ultimately refused to do so. Today, the Sierra Club still maintains that Mineral King should be part of the park. We have consistently opposed the Forest Service's plans to develop the valley, and have worked to encourage legislation to this end.

In the meantime, the Forest Service has recently released its second draft environmental impact statement on the project, a document that confirms the fears of those concerned about the future of Mineral King. For at this late date, the Forest Service is unable to provide specific details about the proposed development. More important, it has virtually ignored the alternative of incorporating Mineral King into Sequoia National Park. But ignoring for the moment this basic flaw in the statement, its other weaknesses are many and obvious.

Filed as a result of a lawsuit brought by the Sierra Club, the statement has been criticized by the club, other conservation organizations, the Resources Agency of the State of California, and the Department of the Interior, which administers Sequoia National Park. Most critics agree that the fundamental weakness of the draft EIS is its attempt to project economic and environmental impacts without knowing the precise details of the proposed development. In a letter to the Forest Service, Sierra Club Executive Director Michael McCloskey wrote: "Where a plan exists only as a concept, the detailed analysis of environmental impact in this ecologically fragile area . . . cannot be performed."

The Interior Department apparently shares this view. In its official response to the draft EIS, the department said, "Throughout the statement the comment is made that, because of uncertainties on the status of the project, detailed planning necessary to determine environmental impacts has not been carried out. The statement has identified lack of information on: the recreation development plan, including the size, features and exact location of the village, ski runs, and parking areas; the transportation system; archaeological sites; impacts from soil erosion and air pollution; and management commitments to protective and mitigating measures. It is not possible to fully understand the environmental impact of the proposal until management intentions are made clear."

The Sierra Club, the California Resources Agency, and the Interior Department all criticized the draft EIS for not considering alternatives to the proposed development. State Secretary for Resources Claire Dedrick wrote: "The draft environmental statement appears to be conclusionary rather than a questioning document. There is a great deal of material presented to justify development of Mineral King and very little is presented of the costs of the proposed development." The Interior Department pointed out that "This statement should discuss in detail the proposal's interrelationship with Sequoia National Park, and the fact that such a development could have adverse effects completely incompatible with the basic purpose of the park." Interior rightly pointed out that since there is legislation pending that would make Mineral King a part of Sequoia National Park, it is important that this alternative be considered in the final environmental impact statement.

The club has especially criticized the way in which the draft EIS handled its discussion of the economic impacts of the proposed development. For example, though the rationale for the entire proposal rests on the Forest Service's contention that there is great demand for additional ski facilities in southern California, its own figures show

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that a surplus of available facilities already exists. It is also clear from the scanty cost figures supplied in the draft that the resort would provide service only for the very affluent. A week for two in Mineral King would cost about $600, whereas a similar trip to a major ski resort in Utah, including air fare from Los Angeles, would cost $580.

Energy costs would also be high. According to the draft EIS, the proposed development would use 22 million kilowatts per year, and this figure does not even include the electricity required for heating or for the proposed railroad into the valley. This is enough electricity to fuel 2,723 American households for a year, the equivalent of 39,558 barrels of oil. Obviously, any environmental impact statement for Mineral King must calculate the total energy needs of the proposed resort development, and having done so, must question those needs in the light of the nationally recognized goal of energy conservation.

The draft EIS has also been criticized for:

- Failing to recognize the seriousness of threats posed to groves of Sierra Big Trees (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) in the area from realignment of the access road and/or building the proposed cog railroad into the valley. The report admits that the grove at Redwood Creek will thereby be "slightly diminished," but offers no solution.
- Not analyzing the effect of a projected 10,000 summer visitors a day on the adjacent back country of Sequoia National Park. Ski lifts to the tops of surrounding ridges would virtually open up what is now mountain wilderness, with significant adverse effects on wildlife, water quality, fishing, vegetation, and the wilderness experience.
- Overestimating the public demand for additional ski facilities and underestimating the demand for additional wilderness.
- Failing to thoroughly analyze the decline of air quality that will follow from the proposed development, and failing to determine the effects of this decline on local vegetation. Smog damage to trees has already been noted in the Mineral King Valley.
- Not fully considering the potential danger posed to archaeological sites in the valley by the proposed development.
- Ignoring the impact on the scenic resources of the valley from the construction of an elaborate resort complex, complete with roads, parking lots, ski lifts, concessions, and lodging facilities.
- Virtually ignoring the costs connected with providing water to the resort complex. The State of California has pointed out that there is now no unappropriated water among the streams draining into the Tulare Lake Basin. This includes the Kaweah River, which drains Mineral King. One million gallons a day would be required in the summer, and this water, even if available, would have to be purchased.

Stephen Whitney

A REMINISCENCE

May 1975

Steamboats and Iron Horses

During the first decade of the current century patterns of transportation in North America were approaching a point of perfection. Ships, steamboats, transcontinental and cross country railways, and inter-urban electric lines with street cars provided adequate and efficient means of reaching all cities and most country towns. Beyond the most remote villages, we would ride the horse-drawn mail stages; otherwise, we would go to the local livery stable for the ever convenient horse and buggy or saddle horse. Between the cities and smaller settlements, all was open space, where the trains ran through farmland valleys, meandered along coastlines, penetrated the mountains, and crossed the trackless desert—unsoiled landscapes of pure air and clean water.

Long extended trips seemed a never-ending succession of getting off the train and boarding the steamboat; leaving the steamboat and re-boarding the train. There were many places where rail and water met, and like most small settlements of the time they were well concentrated, self-contained, and provided ample but simple homelike accommodations. Practically all hotels maintained a dining room. In the larger cities horse-drawn buses met all the trains, providing free transportation to their respective hotels.

Long-distance travel always proved to be a never-ending delight of new impressions, sights and sounds. Every hundred miles, and even distances less, brought forth new and revealing environments, even enticing variations in the taste of food, invariably appetizing, and usually of the quality and quantity of home cooking.

As we passed through villages and towns, many people came down to the station only to watch the trains arrive and depart.

After darkness descended, the low rumble of the train, with the soft, subdued click of the wheels, at times seemed to form a fabric of sounds, like the overtones of an aria, a segment of symphony, or plaintive passage from a nocturne. And likewise, on board a steamboat, the muffled and rhythmic sound from the engines and the soft swish of the water often revealed similar impressions as the craft plied its way upstream, often stemming swift currents of wild waters, and making dock landings where overhanging foilage would brush against the upper deck. Even in sound sleep, echoes and reverberations from bells and steam whistles penetrated the night and reached the ear only as vague, uncertain sounds of some distant dream, faint and far away.

The moonlit nights spent on the train especially presented a kaleidoscopic array of shifting scenes, inspiring to the imagination, satisfying to the senses, and soothing to the soul. After an idyllic dream, one would arise refreshed for an early breakfast in the diner to behold an entirely new series of shifting scenes to the accompaniment of stimulating odors from the kitchen and the enjoyment of tasty food. Then, after eating, back to the spacious rear platform, semi-enclosed by a brass railing, where we sat and viewed to satisfaction the entire panorama through which we so recently had traversed.

These pleasant and peaceful scenes from an irretrievable past vanished with the automobile and the airplane, with interstate highways and airport holding patterns. We recall them not merely as occasions for nostalgia, but as reminders that what we have gained in speed we have lost in comfort, style, air, water, and wilderness. It is not too much to say that our decisions about transportation have impoverished the world. It is not too much to hope that we can use the past to prompt a fresher vision of the future.

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